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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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February 29, 2008

Travel Management Planning Team
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Subject: Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Planning--Proposed Action Scoping Document

FWP staff has reviewed the scooping document and maps for the proposed Bitterroot Travel Plan and offers the following comments.

Comprehensive travel planning on the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) is long overdue, and we commend your effort and the "starting point" you have produced. We agree with Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth who said, "We have got to improve our management [of OHVs] so we get responsible recreational use based on sound outdoor ethics" (Bosworth 2004). FWP believes that this is probably the most important natural resource management action that the BNF has undertaken in recent years, and it will set the stage for travel management for many decades into the foreseeable future. Although we very much appreciate the contentious nature of the matter, there is much at stake.

The heart of the issue is motorized use, particularly OHVs, which also includes snowmobiles. FWP is not opposed to responsible motorized use where it does not compromise natural resources and wildlife habitat or severely negatively impact the outdoor experience of other recreationists. However, the proliferation of unauthorized user-created trails, and the overuse and abuse on some existing legal trails in recent years is appalling. Such problems will likely only get worse with projected population growth in the Bitterroot Valley. In a recent study examining the impacts of population growth on the 175 national forests and grasslands in the country, Stein et al. (2007) found that "The Bitterroot National Forest in Idaho and Montana ranks highest in the Nation" as far as being threatened by development, because "The percentage of private land projected to experience increases in housing density within 10 miles of the Bitterroot National Forest is greater than for any other national forest or grassland." In light of this growth and the increased number of OHVs and motorcycles that will come along with it, we

feel it is important that this issue be addressed now rather than later. Already, some trails that have only been in existence for a few years or have seen a marked increase or change in use in a relatively few years are being considered as "traditional."

OHV and motorcycle use can cause direct resource damage, particularly to soils and riparian areas and by spreading weeds. It can also compromise wildlife habitat by introducing motorized disturbance. This is particularly an issue for species sensitive to disturbance, like mountain goats, or to other species during critical times of the year, like elk on summer range. Large blocks of several square miles of undisturbed areas are important to maintaining usable habitat. An example of compromised habitat on the BNF is in the Skalkaho Basin/Falls Creek area. This used to be a prime elk summer range, and 107 elk were seen there on a summer flight as recently as 2002. But elk use of this area has been steadily declining until very few are observed there now--only 17 in 2006 and 23 in 2007. Coincident with the decline in elk use has been an increase in OHV use that FWP area biologist John Vore, FWP Wildlife Manager John Firebaugh, and USFS biologist John Ormiston observed on their annual trips to monitor vegetation. Increased OHV use has also resulted in resource damage of wet meadow areas. Although the Skalkaho Basin area is an example, similar displacement of elk is happening wherever OHV use has increased on elk summer range. Elk displaced from public land are increasingly becoming a frustration to hunters and a management challenge to FWP. It is worthwhile noting that FWP does not allow use of OHVs on its Wildlife Management Areas in the Bitterroot because of the disturbance to wildlife and the potential for abuse.

The impacts of motorized use on elk and other wildlife are well documented in a substantial and growing body of research literature. Both Canfield et al. (1999) and Gilbert (2003) provide summaries useful in developing a travel plan sensitive to wildlife. Examples that are more recent include Wisdom et al. (2004) finding that 25 percent of elk exhibited a flight response to ATVs that were 1000 meters (1 km or 0.6 miles) away, and Stubblefield (2006) finding that elk in South Dakota selected summer range with low road densities. Working in Montana, Grigg (2007) found that elk in areas that were easily accessible to motorized use, abandoned summer range early, usually before hunting season. Thus elk displaced by OHVs directly negatively impacted elk hunters.

Not only are elk displaced by increased human disturbance, but also when such use occurs in calving areas or neonatal rearing areas there may be an impact on calf survival as well. Studies in Colorado documented a significant decrease in calf survival as a result of only 10 experimental disturbances over the course of the month-long calving period (Phillips and Alldredge 2000; Shively, Alldredge and Phillips 2005). In their 2000 paper, Phillips and Allredge (p 528) noted that, "It is difficult to predict whether a declining population will eventually stabilize or become extirpated; *even more difficult to curtail human activities once they become traditional* [FWP emphasis], or to recover wildlife habitats once they are lost." FWP sees a need to curtail such activities that are quickly becoming considered "traditional" in important wildlife habitats on the BNF.

Motorized routes on ridge tops, especially in alpine and/or elk summer range, should be carefully evaluated. In addition to being important seasonal habitat, such areas can also be important

movement corridors, and motorized use in these areas has a high probability of displacing wildlife. A few examples of such trails are: all portions of Trail 313 along the Sapphire Divide, Trails 41, 44 and 86 in the Gird Creek/Skalkaho Basin/Palisade Mountain area, Trail 106 along Razorback Mountain, Trail 676 along Piquett Ridge, and Trails 177 and 178 in the Saddle Mountain/Andrews Creek area. There are others. Trails situated as these are along ridge tops have a disproportionate effect on elk.

Impacts of OHV and snowmobile use on mountain goats are also of concern to FWP. In the Sapphire Mountains two areas of occupied goat habitat are at issue: the area around Palisade, Dome Shaped and Skalkaho Mountains, and the area including Fox, Congdon, and Kent Peaks, the Rooster Comb and the Chain of Lakes. Goat populations in both areas have declined dramatically, and we no longer issue any hunting licenses in either. In the 1970s, Rideout (1974) did a three-year study in the Palisade, Dome Shaped and Skalkaho Mountains area and estimated there to be 65 to 76 goats (Rideout 1974). It is rare to see one now. There has been a similar decline in the Fox Peak to Chain of Lakes area. Mountain goats in the Saddle Mountain area near Lost Trail Pass are also of concern, but we have less monitoring data there. OHVs and snowmobiles use these areas rather heavily during summer and winter, respectively. This is of concern because mountain goats are sensitive to disturbance and limited in their range. Gilbert (2003: 29) noted, "Mountain goats occupy the highest, coldest, most rugged regions on marginal forage resources of any ungulate in North America. Excessive stress and energy costs of displacement from preferred habitat by motorized access, in summer and winter, can be expected to be especially detrimental for population viability of mountain goats." While motorized use cannot be conclusively implicated in goat population declines in the Sapphire Mountains, it should be noted that goats in the Bitterroot Mountains--where there is little motorized use because of extensive designated wilderness--are doing just fine.

Forest Carnivores, especially wolverine, fisher, lynx, and grizzly bear, are rare, low-density species sensitive to human use, roads, and motorized travel, including snowmobiles (Copland 1996, Ruggario et al 1994, Walker and Craighead 1997, 1998). Snowmobiles pose a particular threat because of the increasing popularity of "highmarking" in high-elevation cirques and drainage heads used by denning female wolverine.

Wildlife linkage zones and corridors are important to all species, but especially so to low-density forest carnivores. The BNF has two areas recognized as important movement corridors (Walker and Craighead 1997, 1998). One links the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem with the Salmon-Selway and includes the part of the BNF north of Stevensville where the Bitterroot Valley narrows. The other, linking the Yellowstone ecosystem with the Salmon-Selway follows the Bitterroot/Big Hole divide through Lost Trail Pass. Protection of these areas is important from a corridor standpoint, but also as functional seasonal habitat for many species.

Motorized use can also severely impact many people's enjoyment of their National Forest. Hunting is one of the main outdoor recreational uses in the Bitterroot Valley. In 2005, there were 19,155 deer and elk hunters in the Bitterroot Valley who spent 132,829 days afield. This is just deer and elk hunters, and does not include people who hunted moose, mountain goat, bighorn sheep, black bear, mountain lion, upland birds, turkey, waterfowl or nongame such as coyotes

and rabbits. Most of this hunting occurs on public land, and most of that public land is the Bitterroot National Forest. An FWP survey of registered OHV owners in Montana found that 33% of hunters disagree or strongly disagree with the guideline that, "To minimize impacts to the environment, OHV users should NOT travel off legal routes to retrieve harvested game," and 51% stated they "sometimes"--and 6.5% "never"--follow that guideline (Lewis and Paige 2006, enclosed). Each year FWP staff in the Bitterroot gets the chance to talk to several thousand of these hunters at the Darby Check Station. And each year comments about OHV use ranks first or second among complaints, rating right up there with comments about wolves. In some places, seasonal road closures have been effective at providing some big game security. However, we believe that roads and trails that are closed seasonally to provide big game security should be closed beginning September 1--instead of October 15--to provide security during hunting season.

Many hunters and other outdoor recreationists have been displaced by motorized use. Managers often misinterpret this as a decrease in demand for nonmotorized use Belich (1988). In fact, the most rapidly increasing outdoor pastimes in the United States are bird watching, day hiking and backpacking (The Wilderness Society 2006).

With the foregoing as background, we offer the following specific comments about motorized use on trails and roads where these differ from the current proposal.

1. **Trail 44** winds its way along a ridge top through prime elk and mountain goat summer range in the Palisade Mountain/Skalkaho Basin area and should be closed to motorized use.

2. **Trail 86** in the Skalkaho Basin area should be closed to motorized use between Trail 44 and the end of Road 714 to provide security for elk and mountain goats. FWP biologist John Vore has been in this area several times and cannot see how this trail could be considered as part of a loop or thoroughfare because there does not seem to be an OHV-suitable route over Skalkaho Mountain.

3. If the above recommendations were to be adopted, then **Trails 88** and **300** should also be closed, as they would lead only to closed trails.

4. **Trails 105, 159, 160** and **161** in the upper Sleeping Child drainage should be closed to provide a large block of secure summer range for elk, and to avoid pushing elk from public land onto private.

5. **Trails 39, 313** and **168** in the Chain of Lakes area go through prime conifer forest and alpine elk, bighorn sheep and mountain goat summer range. Trail 313 should be closed for its entire length because it runs along the Sapphire Divide.

6. **Road 321** in the North Fork of Rye Creek is an extremely popular access point for hunters and should remain open. Closing it would mean that to access the Deer Mountain area people would have to take a very long, circuitous route that may be closed because of snow. There may be opportunity for a seasonal closure outside of hunting season,

especially during spring that would partially mitigate the sedimentation from the road.

7. **Road 446** through Robbins Gulch is also a popular access point and should remain open. Similar to our comments on Road 321, there may be opportunity for a seasonal closure outside of hunting season, especially during spring that would partially mitigate the sedimentation from the road.

8. A series of old, short logging roads between Bush Creek and Moose Creek are in mountain goat winter range and should be closed to snowmobile use. These roads are not part of any loop system and merely go for a ways and end. They are **Roads 5773, 73640, 73643, 73644** and **73650**.

9. There appears to by a typographic error in the proposed change to **Trail 400** to Capri Lake. Instead of the Existing Condition being a map code 10 (Trails open to motorcycles, Seasonal) and the proposed being a map code 8 (Trails open to vehicles 50" or less in width, Seasonal), it should read the other way around.

10. **Trail 205** in Porcupine Creek should be closed to motorcycles year-round instead of seasonally to provide elk summer range security. **Trail 103** should have the same restrictions as Trail 205, regardless of whether they are seasonal or year-round; otherwise, coming from the south, Trail 103 would just dead end where it joins Trail 205.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Mack Long
Regional Supervisor

ML/sr

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Summary of Research

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Selected Results From a 2006 Survey of Registered Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Owners in Montana

RMU Research Summary No. 21

Michael S. Lewis and Ray Paige

July 2006

In the last decade, the sale of off-highway vehicles (OHVs) has increased three-fold. Montana is no exception to this trend. Increasingly, Montanans are purchasing OHVs (especially 4-wheelers) for trail riding, working on the farm or ranch, fishing, and hunting. OHVs include, but are not limited to: motorcycles (dirt bikes), quadricycles (also know as ATV's or 4-wheelers), dune buggies, amphibious vehicles, and air cushion vehicles.

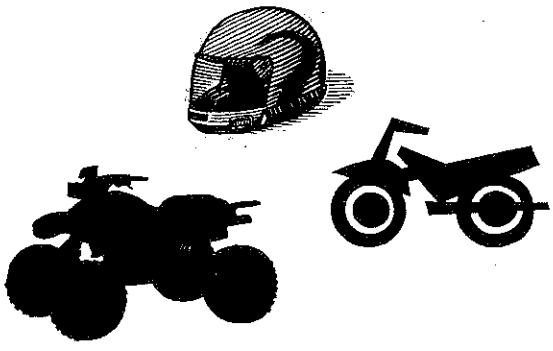
The nature of OHV use makes it essential that riders wear protective clothing (especially helmets), and follow responsible use guidelines in an effort to minimize user conflicts and impacts to the environment. With few exceptions, "cross-county" OHV use (e.g., operating a motorized , wheeled vehicle off a road or trail) is prohibited on publicly owned lands in Montana to protect fragile soils, riparian areas, vegetation, and wildlife.

In concert with federal land management agencies and the Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) promotes a variety of OHV safety and responsible use information in Montana. The goal of FWP's OHV education program is to reduce future OHV-related accidents and encroachments, and improve ethics of OHV riders.

In 2006, FWP conducted a survey of registered OHV owners in Montana as part of an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of their OHV education program. Mailback surveys were successfully administered to 950 registered OHV owners. Overall, a 47 percent response rate to the survey was achieved.

Survey questions were asked in the following areas:

- *How many OHV owners have had safety training?*
- *How often do OHV owners follow important safety precautions when riding OHVs?*
- *How many OHV owners have seen or heard educational materials that address the topic of OHV safety and responsible use?*
- *How often do OHV owners follow important guidelines for responsible use when riding OHVs, and to what extent do they agree with these guidelines?*
- *How many OHV owners are aware of Montana's general laws concerning OHVs and their use?*
- *How many OHV owners have ever used an OHV when hunting, and how do they typically use OHVs when hunting?*
- *How many OHV owners who have ever used an OHV when hunting have seen or heard educational materials that address the topic of hunting and responsible OHV use?*
- *How many OHV owners who have ever used an OHV when hunting follow important guidelines for responsible OHV use when hunting, and to what extent do they agree with these guidelines?*
- *How many OHV owners who have ever used an OHV when hunting are aware of Montana's hunting regulations concerning OHVs?*

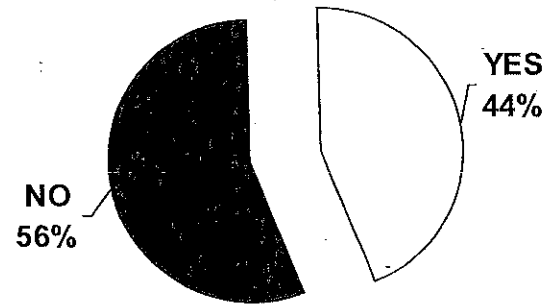


RESULTS

SAFETY TRAINING

Fifty-six percent of the respondents to the survey reported they have NOT had OHV safety training of any kind (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Response to: "Have you had off-highway vehicle (OHV) safety training?"

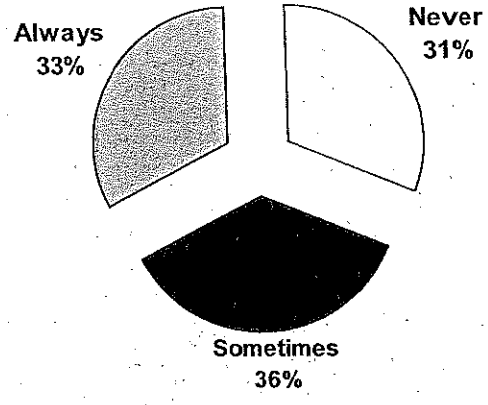


About a third of the respondents who have had training reported they have attended a certified OHV safety education course. Seventy-six percent reported they simply watched a safety video at an OHV dealership or manufacturer.

Safety Precautions

Only a third of the respondents reported they always wear a helmet when riding OHVs (see Figure 2). A little less than a third of the respondents reported they never wear a helmet.

Figure 2. Response to: "When riding OHVs, how often do you wear a helmet?"



Thirty-eight percent of the respondents reported they always wear other safety equipment (e.g., gloves, goggles, chest protectors, shin guards, and/or boots) when riding OHVs. Fourteen percent reported they never wear these types of safety equipment.

Most of the respondents (81 percent) always inspect and prepare their vehicle(s) before riding. And, a strong majority (77 percent) reported they always let someone know where they will be riding and when they will return from riding.

Information Addressing the Topic of OHV Safety and Resposible Use

Eighty-three percent of the respondents reported they have seen written materials (e.g., brochures, posters, articles, etc.) that address the topic of OHV safety and responsible use. Only 13 percent reported they have taken the time to read a lot of the materials they have seen. Eight percent said they have read none of the materials they have seen. Written materials were most often seen at the following places:

- OHV dealership or manufacturer (77 percent)
- Newspaper or magazine (55 percent)
- Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (39 percent)
- U.S. Forest Service (33 percent)
- Hunting regulations (31 percent)
- Fair or outdoor show (30 percent)

In addition to written materials, 76 percent of the respondents reported they have seen or heard advertisements on the television or radio that address the topic of OHV safety and responsible use (and/or noxious week prevention related to the use of OHVs).

Guidelines for Responsible Use When Riding OHVs

Registered OHV owners were asked how often they follow important guidelines for responsible use when riding OHVs, and to what extent do they agree or disagree with these guidelines (see Table 1 below for selected survey results).

Table 1. Response to: ⟶

	How often do you do follow this guideline?			Do you agree with this guideline?				
Selected guidelines for responsible OHV use in general:	Never	Sometimes	Always	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important that OHV users seek out information on vehicle use regulations for the area(s) they intend to ride before riding	4.6%	22.9%	72.5%	2.4%	3.1%	12.1%	48.2%	34.2%
It is important that OHV users carry travel maps that show land ownership and travel restrictions	15.0%	41.6%	43.8%	1.4%	4.8%	21.9%	45.4%	26.2%
OHV users should closely follow all trail, road, and area restrictions that are put in place to protect natural resources, wildlife, and provide non-motorized opportunities	1.2%	15.1%	83.7%	3.1%	5.9%	7.8%	34.4%	48.7%
To minimize impacts to the environment, OHV users should avoid riding cross-country or shortcutting the main route when riding on trails or roads	3.0%	20.4%	76.6%	1.7%	6.6%	11.1%	35.3%	45.3%
To minimize impacts to the environment, OHV users should avoid riparian areas and wetlands	2.8%	25.6%	71.6%	1.4%	4.5%	13.9%	31.7%	48.5%

MONTANA'S GENERAL LAWS CONCERNING OHVs AND THEIR USE

Nearly all of respondents (greater than 95 percent) were aware of the following laws in Montana:

- *ATVs, 4-wheelers, and motorcycles used off-road on public lands in Montana must be registered with the Montana Department of Justice, Motor Vehicle Division, as Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs).*
- *With few exceptions, OHVs must be registered as motor vehicles to be used on public roadways in Montana.*

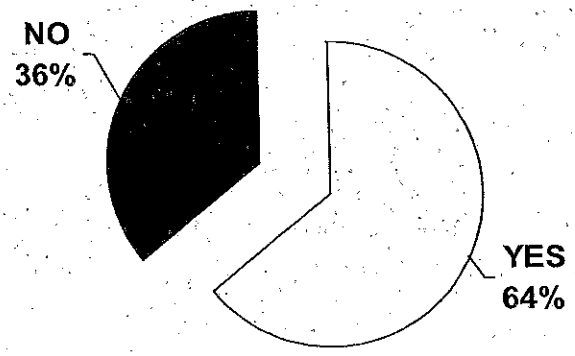
However, 18 percent of the respondents were NOT aware that:

- *ATVs, 4-wheelers, and motorcycles used off-road on public lands in Montana are required to have U.S. Forest Service approved spark arrestors.*

HUNTING AND OHV USE

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported they have used an OHV while hunting (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Response to: "Have you ever used an OHV while hunting?"



The top three uses of OHVs when hunting were as follows:

1) Recovering/retrieving harvested game (reported by 80 percent of the respondents)
2) Traveling to and from hunting areas (79 percent)
3) Scouting out potential hunting areas (57 percent)

INFORMATION ADDRESSING THE TOPIC OF HUNTING AND RESPONSIBLE OHV USE

Two-thirds of the respondents who have used an OHV when hunting reported they have seen written materials (e.g., brochures, posters, articles, etc.) that address the topic of hunting and responsible OHV use. Only 18 percent reported they have taken the time to read a lot of these materials. Six percent said they have read none of the materials they have seen. Written materials were most often seen at the following places:

- Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (69 percent)
- Hunting regulations (57 percent)
- Newspaper or magazine (49 percent)
- U.S. Forest Service (39 percent)
- OHV dealer or manufacturer (31 percent)
- Bureau of Land Management (22 percent)
- Fair or outdoor show (23 percent)

In addition to written materials, 55 percent of the respondents reported they have seen or heard advertisements on the television or radio that address the topic of hunting and responsible OHV use.

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE OHV USE WHEN HUNTING

Registered OHV owners who have used an OHV when hunting were asked how often they follow important guidelines for responsible OHV use when hunting, and to what extent do they agree or disagree with these guidelines (see Table 2 below for survey results).

Table 2. Response to: →

Selected guidelines for responsible OHV use while hunting:	How often do you do follow this guideline?			Do you agree with this guideline?				
	Never	Sometimes	Always	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
To minimize impacts to other hunters, OHV users should access the area they intend to hunting on legal routes and then hunt on foot	0.4%	21.1%	78.5%	1.5%	3.7%	13.7%	31.9%	49.3%
To minimize impacts to the environment, OHV users should NOT Travel off legal routes to retrieve harvested game	6.5%	51.6%	41.9%	12.6%	21.1%	21.2%	19.6%	34.2%

MONTANA'S HUNTING REGULATIONS CONCERNING OHVs

Nearly all of respondents (greater than 93 percent) were aware of the following hunting regulations pertaining to OHV use in Montana:

- *It is illegal to shoot from any motorized vehicle including OHVs. An exemption exists for disabled hunters with the proper permits.*
- *Hunters may not use OHVs to concentrate, drive, rally, stir-up, corral or harass wildlife.*
- *Hunters are prohibited from shooting on, from, or across the right-of-way of a publicly maintained road open to vehicular traffic. The right-of-way includes road, shoulders, berms, and barrow pits and generally extends from fence-line to fence-line.*

DISCUSSION

This survey is the first of its kind in Montana, and is intended to provide baseline information to be used by FWP to help evaluate the effectiveness of their OHV education program over time.

Despite the fact that most OHV owners in Montana have been exposed to a variety of safety and responsible use information, it was learned from this survey that the majority of owners:

- Have had little or no formal safety training, and…
- Most do not always wear important safety equipment such as helmets when riding OHVs.

Furthermore, some OHV owners do not always follow important guidelines for responsible use when operating OHVs. For instance, about a third of the respondents who have used an OHV when hunting disagree or strongly disagree that "OHV users should NOT travel off legal routes to retrieve harvested game". Only 42 percent of the respondents who have used an OHV when hunting reported they always follow this guideline. Nearly 7 percent reported they never follow this guideline. And, 52 percent reported they follow this guideline sometimes.

These results speak to the importance of FWP's OHV education program, and the need to continue promoting a variety of OHV safety and responsible use information in effort reduce future OHV-related accidents and encroachments, and improve ethics of OHV riders. Along those lines, in the near future FWP intends to explore the following:

1. Work with its partners to develop more and better OHV maps that provide information about the many roads and trails where people can legally ride OHVs across the state.
2. Explore sending direct mailings of OHV safety and responsible use information to registered OHV owners.
3. Make use of more television ads that are informative, interesting, entertaining, and tap into the values of OHV owners across the state.
4. Do a better job of providing safety and responsible use information at places where people go to ride OHVs.
5. Work with its partners to do a better job of enforcing Montana OHV laws, rules, and regulations.

It is anticipated that FWP will replicate this survey in the future as part of evaluating its OHV education program and the effectiveness of these and other strategies over time.

More OHVs are being sold today than ever before. And, riding an OHV is one of the many important recreational activities pursued by Montanans across the state. FWP recognizes this and is working hard to serve the needs of all Montanans, including those who enjoy riding OHVs in our great state.

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Contact the Responsive Management Unit of FWP by phone at (406) 444-4758.

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GRANT PROGRAMS FOR OHV TRAILS. FWP administers two programs which provide grant money for the rehabilitation and maintenance of OHV trails and riding areas.

(1) Montana OHV Grant Program. Funding for this program is provided through OHV registration fees and 1/8 of 1% of state gas taxes. Grants are awarded annually.

(2) Recreational Trails Program Grants. Federal funds to enhance, develop and maintain trails come through the Recreational Trails Program. The program provides that each year 30% of the money for use in Montana be earmarked for motorized trails.

Detailed information and applications are available on the web at fwp.mt.gov/parks/grants.asp or call the FWP Trails Program Coordinator at (406) 444-4585